

Language

Language is a set of arbitrary symbols shared among a group. These symbols may be verbal, signed, or written. It is one of the primary ways that we **communicate**, or send and receive messages. Non-verbal forms of communication include body language, body modification, and appearance (what we wear and our hairstyle).

Even non-human primates have a **communication system**; the difference, as far as we can determine, is that non-human primates use a **call system**, which is a system of oral communication that uses a set of sounds in response to environmental factors, e.g., a predator approaching. They can only signal one thing at a time. For instance, ‘here is food,’ or ‘a leopard is attacking.’ They cannot signal something like ‘I’ve found food but there’s a leopard here so run away.’



Chimpanzee vocalizing

However, primatologists conducting communication studies with great apes raise questions about the great apes’ ability to communicate. Primatologists like Susan Savage-Rumbaugh, Sally Boysen, and Francine “Penny” Patterson report that they have been able to have human-like communication with bonobos, chimpanzees, and gorillas through sign language, even conveying feelings like sympathy. Washoe was the first chimpanzee to learn American Sign Language. Washoe, who was rescued in the wild after her mother was killed by poachers, learned over three hundred signs, some of which she taught to her adopted son, Loulis, without any help from human agents. She also told jokes, lied, and swore. Other great apes like Koko, a western lowland gorilla born at the San Francisco Zoo, have demonstrated **linguistic displacement**, which is the ability to talk about things that are not present or even real, by signing for her kitten when it was not present. She also displayed mourning behavior after being told that actor and comedian Robin Williams died (read more about Koko’s reaction in this *Huffington Post* article, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/13/koko-gorilla-robin-williams_n_5675300.html).



China

Linguistic displacement has long been identified as a hallmark of human communication, something that set it apart from non-human primate communication. Coupled with **productivity**, human language systems do appear to be more complex than our non-human primate cousins. Productivity refers to “the ability to create an infinite range of understandable expressions from a finite set of rules” (Miller 2011: 206). Using combinations of symbols, facial expressions, sounds, written word, signs, and body language, humans can communicate things in a myriad of ways (for a humorous look at facial expressions, check out “What a Girl’s Facial Expressions Mean” on YouTube [<https://youtu.be/KAJvUXklBeo>]).

All cultures have language. Most individuals within that culture are fully competent users of the language without being formally taught it. One can learn a language simply by being exposed to it, which is why foreign language teachers espouse immersion as the best way to learn.

No one language has more efficient **grammar** than another, and there is no correlation between grammatical complexity and social complexity; some small, homogenous cultures have the most complex language. In December 2009, *The Economist* named the Tuyuca language the “hardest” language. The Tuyuca live in the eastern Amazon. It is not as hard to speak as some other languages as there are simple consonants and a few nasal vowels; however, it is an **agglutinative language**, so the word *hóabāsiriga* means “I do not know how to write.” *Hóabāsiriga* has multiple morphemes each of which contribute to the word’s meaning. A **morpheme** is the smallest sound that has meaning. Consider the word ‘cow.’ It is a single morpheme—if we try to break the word down into smaller sound units it has no meaning. Same with the word ‘boy.’ Put them together and we have a word with two morphemes (O’Neil 2013). Morphemes are a part of **morphology**, which is the grammatical category of analysis concerned with how sounds, or **phonemes**, are combined. Morphemes are combined into strings of sounds to create speech, which is grouped into sentences and phrases. The rules that govern how words should be combined are called **syntax**, which is the second of two grammar categories of analysis. In Tuyuca, all statements require a verb-ending to indicate how the speaker knows something. For instance, *diga ape-wi* means that the speaker knows the boy played soccer because of direct observation, but *diga ape-hiyi* means that the speaker assumed the boy played soccer. Tuyuca has somewhere between fifty and one hundred forty noun classes based on gender, compared to Spanish which has two noun classes that are based on gender.

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